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LITERATURE AND THE LITERARY PRODUCT *

I shall venture to call attention to certain important conditions existing in the United States that essentially affect literature: first, as regards the university; second, as regards the public; and third, as regards the author.

First, as regards the university. I am the more sure of what I should like to say on this point because of my own experiences during the past year. I have long been teaching literature, but it seems to me that only within the last year have I begun really to read literature. It happened in this way: My own university had exercised her customary liberality in giving me a long leave of absence, and I have been spending it in the delightful and immortal lands that border on the Mediterranean, taking my fill not only of life in the open air, but of the long-deferred pleasure of reading — of really reading — my favorite books, the dramatists and historians of Greece, the historians and poets of Rome, the wonderful epics of the Italian Renaissance. It was a pleasure which in the midst of our toilsome profession I had long anticipated with delight. But what I had not before wholly realized was the joy of reading when freed from the tyranny of so-called scholarship, from the tyranny of a whole library full of commentaries, of books of textual criticism and historical criticism and comparative criticism, of all the dreary waste of books that, like encroaching sands, are blotting out our fair oasis of literature.

And thus I was confirmed in the doubt that had for a decade been growing in my mind that literature in our universities is less and less being taught in a manner genuinely helpful to the student. We are weighted down with learning; books about books are our bane. Take the two precious little volumes I carry most with me — the New Testament and "The Divine Comedy." How quickly the reading of each is likely to degenerate into the intricacies of exegesis and the mazes of research.

* From an address delivered at the exercises commemorative of the Semi-Centennial of the University of the South, June 26, 1907.

The very catalogue of the books dealing with Dante in a single American library is a work of 600 pages, in fine print, and with two columns to the page. And that was nearly ten years ago. If we do not know, nowadays, what the most recent investigator has said of the reasons why Dante chose Cato as the doorkeeper for Purgatory, and what are the latest results of German scholarship with regard to the text of a disputed line, we can scarcely enjoy even "The Divine Comedy" with a calm conscience.

And yet how simple is this much-bewritten poem when one approaches it without all the paraphernalia of criticism and exegesis, as did Dante's contemporaries, and as we may still do. An unsuccessful politician he was, an exiled poet, a scholar who had made all learning his province. And at forty, baffled, defeated, bitter at heart, but sustained by his belief in the invincibility of truth, he determined to depict for men the hierarchy of the vices and the virtues, the world of the utterly sinful, the world of frail mortals, and the world of the saints, as God himself might see them in his justice, rank upon rank—concentrating all his wisdom and all his skill in the effort to teach mankind the beauty of holiness, of whatever ministers to the uplifting of the community; of the ugliness of sin, and all that depraves the individual and impoverishes the commonwealth. How simply the narrative runs! How the pictures burn themselves in the mind! What food for meditation; what stimulus to righteous living!

And yet it is at present almost impossible in our universities to read Dante or Homer or Vergil, or even writers in our tongue, in this straightforward fashion. Why? Because we must at present use literature mainly as a means of intellectual discipline, neglecting its emotional and spiritual elements. Now, intellectual discipline is all but all-important, and we are wise in placing it first for the moment; but the need for a fuller and deeper and saner emotional life is not to be neglected. Poetry has its own special part to play in civilization. Literature is a tremendous power for the continual uplifting of the race, for strengthening and purifying its emotional life; and some means must be found in every university in the land for a more vitalizing study of literature, and a wiser and surer method

of training the teachers to whom we commit this important function.

Second, with regard to the attitude towards literature of the general public. I venture to say that in this respect we shall find on investigation that the situation in the United States is entirely normal and very promising; that it does not suffer in comparison with conditions in England or France or Germany. We have an immense public interested in periodical literature, in the theatre, and in books. After a short absence from the country one is amazed, for example, to see the number of wholly new periodicals, each with a surprisingly large body of readers. The amount of capital invested in these various ways of supplying the public with literature is simply enormous. The publisher of to-day, too, is an enlightened and sagacious capitalist. He is no longer contented to be a mere passive dealer in books—a middleman, as it were. He is an instigator, almost a producer of literature. Through skillful and trained agents he informs himself of the trend of emotional and intellectual life throughout the land, studying the outcropping tastes and impulses of the public, until he is satisfied that some large mass of people is silently, unconsciously yearning for some enjoyment or information that has not yet been supplied. Through other agents, then—through trained and skillful writers—he attempts to satisfy these as yet unexpressed, unrealized longings. By such means, by such creative imagination, we might almost say, does the American publisher exert an exceedingly strong influence on the ideals and aspirations of the public at large.

But two real and obvious dangers in this situation at once present themselves. The publisher's name carries weight, the author, we will say, is of good repute, the advertising is skillful, the critics seem favorable. The ordinary man is too apt to yield to this apparent unanimity of opinion. "I don't know about such things," he confesses, "but they all say it is good, and I suppose it is." But he *does* know—the ordinary man *does* know. Literature is not a convention; it is the eternally new, the direct appeal of a man to a man, of the author to each of his readers. There is no question of experts: we are all on the same

plane. I appeal for greater independence on the part of the ordinary reader, for a determination on his part to read as an individual -- to listen to reason, but never to abdicate the judgment of his own deep and instinctive feelings.

Again, there is danger that we shall be led astray by the great mass of trivial and sensational productions. The author too frequently lives merely by his pen; the publisher is often anxious for immediate returns on his investment. He must reimburse himself for his payments and at once begin a new venture. The temptation of both the publisher and the author is thus to beguile us into rapidity of reading, into a series of trifling amusements. Against this second danger I appeal for greater thoughtfulness in our reading, for less haste, less unrest, for more leisurely enjoyment, for a calmer and more judicious criticism.

And lastly, with regard to the author himself. The number of persons now wishing to take up the profession of authorship is wholly unparalleled. It seems at times as if every woman one met had a novel in her desk, every man a play in his pocket. But it must be remembered that authorship is scarcely a real profession. A few writers in every age may support themselves by their pens, and of these a smaller number write the better for the commercial stimulus of supply and demand. But authorship is really a strange, an almost inexplicable psychological process. Any grown person can express himself clearly or can learn to do so; but only certain very rare individuals have the innate ability of employing that peculiar dynamic form of expression which we call literature, and these few individuals have the power only on rare occasions.

The process involves, as a rule, an emotional state almost precisely parallel to that so well described by Professor James in his "Varieties of Religious Experience." It is analogous to the psychological phenomenon of conversion. Succeeding a long period of unrest and perturbation, of ill-coördinated impulses toward expression, comes at last a moment of illumination, as it were, in which the imagination bursts into flower. A new, an individual form reveals itself; the architecture of the whole work becomes clear; and the author composes to the bidding of an

inner voice. Then follow months or years of patient labor in adjustment and readjustment, and at last a new work of literature is added to the world's store, a new instrument for the interpretation of life, a new message from man to mankind. There are *fewer* real authors than profess themselves as such — *more* real authors than we imagine who are ignorant of their power. I counsel then for authors in general other callings than that of authorship — professions that will give them greater knowledge of life, more leisure for meditation, more opportunity for the workings within them of the mysterious power which is their birthright, but which is not often to be wielded at the command of the owner, and which cannot wisely be submitted to the beck and call of the publisher.

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